

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

The China Beat Blog Archive 2008-2012

China Beat Archive

9-3-2008

An Olympic Evaluation

Eric Setzekorn

University of California, Irvine

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/chinabeatarchive>



Part of the [Asian History Commons](#), [Asian Studies Commons](#), [Chinese Studies Commons](#), and the [International Relations Commons](#)

Setzekorn, Eric, "An Olympic Evaluation" (2008). *The China Beat Blog Archive 2008-2012*. 283.
<http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/chinabeatarchive/283>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the China Beat Archive at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in The China Beat Blog Archive 2008-2012 by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

An Olympic Evaluation

September 3, 2008 in Uncategorized by [The China Beat](#) | [No comments](#)

By Eric Setzekorn

With the Olympics already more than a week in the past, life in Beijing is slowly returning to normal. The Chinese government appears to have achieved what it wanted, producing an overwhelming show to awe foreign and domestic audiences and a clutch of gold medal winners to gloat over. The results for two of the more hidden goals of the games look mixed: promoting athletics for personal health along with national pride and using the Olympics to educate a new generation of urban Chinese as confident global citizens. And a negative legacy from 2008 looks to be the expansion of governmental authority in cases of government-proclaimed necessity.

An important legacy of the Olympics was supposed to be its promotion of athletics in Chinese life, but an unintended consequence of China's growing sports mania is the increasing individualism of sports stars. Promotion of sports and physical activity as a way to regenerate the vitality and health of the Chinese people has been a popular idea for over a century and was heavily promoted during the Maoist period. The need to promote sustainable interest in sports as part of the average lifestyle has become more urgent as a newly affluent urban class is changing their diets to include less healthy food as their wealth increases. Soaring obesity rates among children in coastal regions are not only due to diet but also lifestyle factors such as widespread on-line gaming and near universal access to television, which also inhibits development of peer relationships.

While China's gold medal count was high in 2008, the overwhelming number of China's gold medals have come in solo events that emphasize technique and skill rather than strenuous cardiovascular exertion. Commercially viable sports such as soccer and basketball, which have huge numbers of Chinese fans and are available to the poor in a way platform diving or skeet shooting is not, performed extremely poorly in spite of having several world-class players. A generation of Chinese girls now dream of gymnastic glory when a more sustainable and positive habit would be the promotion of soccer, volleyball and basketball for exercise and socialization.

In the quarterfinal basketball game between China and Lithuania, the tiny Baltic country of four million people humiliated China on its home court by a score of 94 to 68. Lithuania defeated a nation over 300 times as populous by playing a solid, team-oriented strategy while China floundered due to a lack of coordination and teamwork among its world-famous NBA stars (a problem that has plagued past US teams as well). China's most famous athlete, Yao Ming, the perennial NBA All-Star, China's Olympic flag bearer, and idolized for his accomplishments as a pioneer of Chinese sports abroad, is representative of these new Chinese superstars. Over the past three years, as he has become more comfortable in his status as an elite player, he has become more outspoken, even openly criticizing the centralized sports system's heavy-handed management of the basketball team. In response, one of the older coaches implied Yao had been corrupted by his time in the U.S.

However, minor rebellions by star athletes will likely increase as their popularity and independent sources of income immunizes them from official consequences. In addition to increased independence, athletes are undertaking social action without direction from the central government. (For instance, after the recent earthquake in Sichuan, Yao established his own foundation to collect donations and provide assistance rather than simply donate money to existing government programs.) But Yao's personal fame worked against China during the Olympics because his popularity means that fans expect him to play almost the entire game, and low status coaches acquiesce to this demand, so that by half-way through the third quarter in the Lithuania game he looked exhausted and hindered any attempt for a comeback.

There are still severe limits for many of China's cloistered stars in less commercially lucrative sports such as diving and gymnastics. This was shown by the banning of Guo Jingjing's former boyfriend, gold medal diver Tian Liang, after he challenged the Chinese diving team for greater personal control and freedom. As China becomes more integrated in global sports, athlete-driven pressure for decentralization will grow.

For foreigners visiting Beijing, especially first-time visitors to China, the Olympic experience was an almost picture-perfect blend of idealized chinoiserie and ultra-modern convenience. Thousands of blue-shirted college volunteers facilitated the tourist hordes' need to navigate the transportation grid, enter sporting events, and even find good restaurants. The Olympics served as a way to groom thousands of volunteers to become comfortable dealing with foreigners in a confident and knowledgeable manner and become the point of the spear in business and government in the new "Chinese Century."

However, real progress in terms of language fluency and cross-cultural understanding was slight due to the controlled and directed nature of foreigner to volunteer interaction. Much of the problem stems from the draconian visa requirements that essentially restricted access to upper-class Europeans and Americans on package tours. With an average age in their forties, these visitors were understandably viewed as safer and more commercially lucrative than twenty-something backpackers.

The carefully screened and prepped volunteers who greeted them were selected by rigorous foreign language exams and forced to undergo weeks of full-time training, and so real interaction between visitors and volunteers was stunted by the seldom-deviated-from official guidelines. Any question regarding politics or international relations was either ignored or directed to one of the many volunteers who are party members, easily identified by the small red hammer-and-sickle pins on their shirts.

The few cases where it was possible to move past conversations centered around reciting the gold medal count, the volunteer's worldviews were frequently a blend of jingoistic nationalism and conspiracy theories. After a long period of ingratiating small talk with one airport volunteer, after verifying by my ID that I was not French, he told me he was happy to greet people from every country but France and that he and his fellow students would never shop at Carrefour because "they want to split up China." Another volunteer, a finance student, spoke glowingly of the best-selling book "Currency Wars" (*huobi zhanzheng*) which identifies the Federal Reserve, Jews and John Hinckley Jr., among others, as attempting to control the world economy and hinder developing countries like China. While the volunteer experience has certainly made life easier for the overwhelming majority of foreign visitors who don't speak Chinese, the entire process was a controlled exercise which left most Olympic volunteers with a very shallow and un-realistic view of foreigners and likewise the foreign visitors' views of the future leaders of China.

Perhaps the largest negative from the 2008 Olympic games has been the expansion in state oversight and control in urban spaces and private life. Like other massive projects such as the controversial Three Gorges Dam or Chinese resettlement in Xinjiang, the Beijing games required massive relocation, personal hardship for many citizens, and an unwanted intrusion into personal lives in pursuit of outside directed goals. Unlike those projects, Beijing is an urban area with an educated and relatively affluent population. The Olympics served as the pretext under which new offices such as the all-powerful city planning department or the ominously named "Civilization Department" rapidly grew in size and scope. Beijing will thus be left with a significant government organizational capacity with experience and the means to continue large-scale planning and development unhindered by oversight mechanisms.

Beijing's Olympic construction projects have already been integrated into grandiose schemes for 2020 and 2030 which rival the hubris of Le Corbusier's mid-century visions. The growth of government entities in areas of personal behavior will likely continue due to a political desire to create a vision of Chinese cities and Chinese people who are attractive to foreigners and deferential to authority. Already, Beijing subway posters are replacing the Fuwa with "Wen-Wen" and "Ming-Ming" shown as a small boy and girl reminding residents of acceptable behavior and personal standards of conduct. Many of the public campaigns against behavior deemed to be "un-civilized" and promoting top-down prestige driven development have already been copied by Shanghai as it prepares for the 2010 World Expo.

In 2001, I felt incredibly fortunate to be in Tiananmen Square when the announcement came that Beijing had won the Olympic games. However, that night my foreign friends and I all wore running shoes because we believed if Beijing did not win the games we should leave the Square as quickly and

directly as possible to avoid trouble. At that time, I believed the Olympics would help Beijing become more open, cosmopolitan, cleaner, and a more enjoyable place for both foreigners and Chinese to live. While Beijing has changed incredibly since 2001, the earlier hope that the Beijing Games would have any sort of similar political effect to the 1988 Seoul games has long since evaporated. The events of this August have been exciting and entertaining, but the overall legacy of security outside airports and surveillance microphones in taxis seem mixed and to this long-time resident of what is one of the world's great cities, 2008 feels like a missed opportunity.

Tags: [The 2008 Beijing Olympics](#)